Space stories steal the spotlight

For much of last July, the big news was out in space. The successful Mars Pathfinder mission, with its spunky little rover exploring rocks named after cartoon characters, led the evening broadcasts and was featured daily in the papers. The mission's web pages logged 100 million hits the first day.

The only real competition was a different kind of space story: the 50th anniversary of the alleged extraterrestrial landing in Roswell, N.M., and the U.S. government's alleged efforts to explain away the phenomena that true believers call proof of an alien invasion. According to a CNN/Time magazine poll, 65 percent of those surveyed think a UFO crash-landed in Roswell in 1947. A staggering 80 percent say they believe the government is hiding knowledge that aliens exist.

What do the two stories have in common? "I think the public senses that in some way [space exploration] is related to the big questions we all have," says Michael Allison, adjunct professor of astronomy at NASA's Columbia-affiliated Goddard Institute for Space Studies. "We would all be thrilled by the prospect of learning that there is someone out there," he says. "We find ourselves living on a planet with all kinds of problems, and it would be wonderful to know that another civilization somewhere else has managed to get through these problems. Maybe this [Roswell] stuff is an expression of an authentic human yearning."

Steven Ross, associate professor of professional practice at the Graduate School of Journalism, says the search for life is also the real draw in Mars Pathfinder. "[The mission] is arcane in the sense that no one really understands what geologists do, but it's not arcane in the sense of the bottom line, which is life," Ross says. "Remember last year -- conveniently on the first day of the Republican national convention -- NASA announced the possibility that life had been discovered in rock that came from Mars. That helped pique public curiosity."

Ross also praised the Pathfinder coverage as "masterful public relations." The real triumph, he explains, is in making the space agency's new "faster, better, cheaper" philosophy telegenic. "NASA's been getting its prestige back with

this on-the-cheap planetary stuff that actually works. The Martian probe had a definable goal, which was 'get the thing up there, get the thing down there, roll the thing about, generate at least one picture.' So they met their goals."

David Helfand, chairman of the Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, elaborates: "For about four decades now we've been told, 'If we wanted to maximize the science return, we wouldn't put people in space. But we have to put people in space; otherwise nobody would be interested and we'd never get any tax money.' This seems to be an excellent demonstration that that's just not true." To some extent, Ross contends, the media were "primed to cover this, no matter what," partly because of the White House's political agenda. "Anything that makes Al Gore look good, [the Clinton Administration is] promoting, and the space program is one of his areas. When the White House called the scientists during their press conference to congratulate them, I was struck with how beautifully staged it was."

On the other hand, from a Mars specialist's point of view, the popular coverage lacked rigor. "Scientifically I didn't think very much of it," says Lamont-Doherty senior research scientist John Longhi, who studies the formation and melting of Martian rock. "It was too much a matter of 'show the little buggy went here, show the little buggy went there,' and giving things cute names."

To assistant professor of sociology Jeffrey Olick, one factor in the search for life, either at Roswell or on Mars, is the long-standing human habit of finding an "other" against which to define ourselves, especially in times of cultural upheaval. "At this particular point in history we locate the exotic in space, whereas in earlier times we might have located it in faraway countries."

But Michael Allison attributes public interest to "the romance of science" as well. "It's commonly supposed that science is not an imaginative activity," he says. "But at the threshold of scientific research, it involves an intellectual daring and creativity that might otherwise be connected with the arts." Some people believe it was no accident that the flowering of the arts and sciences in the Renaissance happened at the same time that Europeans were beginning their new voyages of discovery to the Western Hemisphere -- and that we could be on the threshold of a new era of exploration. "I think that we only dimly apprehend the importance of these very tentative explorations of the other planets," says Allison. "It may be important to us in a way that we hardly realize." -- ***Lauren Walker***

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